

The Herbalist

By **Dr. Kathy Girard, URI Master Gardener**



Bay, Sweet (*Laurus nobilis*; Family Lauraceae)

Bay has been named “Herb of the Year 2009” by the International Herb Association. This designation is meant to educate the public about lesser known herbs through generating marketing materials for nurseries and plant growers.

Bay is a perennial tree, growing in the Mediterranean to a height of 60 feet. The smooth bark has an olive-green or reddish hue. Evergreen, shiny lanceolate leaves are alternate with short stalks and are about 3 to 4 inches long with smooth, wavy margins. In warmer climates small yellow flower clusters are followed by dark purple or black berries.

In the Rhode Island climate bay is grown as a slow-growing potted shrub. It is not particular with regard to soil but requires good drainage. Bays can be started in a 5-inch pots and should be transplanted in early spring if root-bound. Once bays are large enough to be grown in tubs, they should not be transplanted unless it is necessary to refresh exhausted soil. Although bay can be started from cuttings it is a very long process and requires patience and daily misting. The plant is generally disease and pest free and will protect other plants nearby from insect pests. It can be set outside in a shady sport during the summer months but a cool room is needed for overwintering.

Bay has been used as a culinary, medicinal and decorative agent since ancient times. Fresh bay leaves are much stronger than their dried counterparts from the grocery store and are commonly used in stews, soups, and meat and fish dishes. The leaves can also be used to repel pantry moths, fleas, and lice. The oil has been added to bruise and sprain liniments to relieve pain.

The Oracle at Delphi is said to have chewed the leaves and inhaled the smoke of burning bay leaves to induce visions. Bay was also worn on the head for protection and as an honor for victors in sports and battles. Laurel continues to be associated with honor today as we name poet laureates and confer baccalaureate degrees. (The word baccalaureate means laurel berries).

Bay was also surrounded by superstition and was said to protect users from witchcraft and evil. It was always a part of weddings, funerals, and cultural activities. “Neither witch nor devil, nor thunder or lightning, will hurt a man on a place where a Bay Tree is.”, wrote Culpepper. During epidemics Roman Emperors moved out into the country where it was believed that breathing air scented by bay trees was therapeutic. If trees were harmed by frost or died in a harsh winter it was considered to be a disastrous omen.